

OZUKI SALON

INTERVIEWER: CANDACY TAYLOR
INTERVIEWEE: STAFF AT OZUKI SALON
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KEY: CT – CANDACY TAYLOR (INTERVIEWER)
SL – STEVEN LANDRY - STYLIST
EP - ELIZABETH PIEROTTI – CO-OWNER
IK - IKU KAWASHITA – CO-OWNER
AY - AKIKO YOSHIHARA

CT: I would like everyone to introduce yourself and state the number of years you've been doing hair and how long you've been working at Ozuki.

AY: My name is Akiko Yoshihara, I've been in the states since 2001 and I've been doing hair for about 10 years. I was here first and then I moved to LA, I was working at a different salon in LA and [inaudible] worked for 2 years and then I got here, so since 2005, I've been working here 7 years.

IK: My name is Iku Kawashita. I started in Japan in 1969. I came here in '74 and there was probably a one year gap but I've been working in Georgetown about all that time.

SL: My name is Steve Landry. I've been at this salon for about 12 years and I've worked in Georgetown for about 32 years.

CT: We can talk as a group, just please don't speak over each other so I can distinguish who is speaking. But I would like to hear about what your other salons were like and how it's different working at Ozuki.

SL: Well for me, this having happened at this salon after I was already here and having a similar clientele as Iku, we basically had a fairly high-end Washington clientele to begin with. I do very few Asian people because the clients want an Asian speaker that they feel comfortable with that does hair similar to theirs, so I basically have my same old clientele that's mostly word of mouth.

CT: So did you bring them with you?

SL: Uh huh.

CT: I see.

SL: Even Iku, who is the owner, brought his with him too.

EP: Steven was here before we changed and became an Asian salon. The salon name was Industry, we had moved from another block. And we were just kind of an anonymous salon in a sea of salons. Iku and Steven had a very healthy clientele, they still do, but it was kind of difficult for us to make it. We just felt that we didn't have an identity, so then we decided to become a Japanese salon. Iku started to get some Japanese clients and when I asked, "How did you find out about us?" And they said, "Well we wanted to go to a Japanese hairdresser. And so then we decided well that's what we should do. So that's when we started to look for Japanese hairdressers. Keiko {sp???} came first and was very instrumental in helping us feel and know the difference between a Japanese salon and an American salon and really helped us figure it out.

CT: How did she do that?

EP: I think because Keiko {???} was in Tokyo before she came to us and had experience in Japanese salons and we talked about...*what's a Japanese salon like...what kinds of things do Japanese clients want to have?* She helped us with the logo, she helped us get things written in Japanese, our card is bilingual, we sent out announcements in Japanese, all kinds of things.

CT: So was it challenging to speak to an Americanized-Japanese audience versus a traditional Japanese audience? You seem to have a varied audience, its not one size fits all here.

SL: I think everybody felt comfortable and just kind of fell into their....

CT: ...their niche.

SL: Yeah. So Asian clients or Japanese clients that already here or very Americanized or Japanese-American, I didn't really tell a huge difference sometimes when people are fresh from Japan, working for the Embassy or going to school...it's a little more confusing for them just due to the fact that a way a business works here. So they come into the salon, it's just paying for something, or getting their point across...it's a little different for them, not so much for us.

CT: So can you talk about the difference working with Asian hair? I know for me, being black, some stylists are more familiar with my hair texture, so that's where I end up going. Do you find that's true for Japanese clients? Or are they coming here more for cultural comforts or do you think it's a balance between the two?

AY: Both. The Japanese person knows best about their hair, so they feel comfortable.

CT: How is Japanese hair different? I've read that there are 13 layers of keratin, which is why it's so straight and harder to get curl into. Is that true? Can you educate me about this?

SL: I think Japanese hair is as varied as black hair or whatever.

EP: Yeah, I would agree. Yeah all of Asian hair, it is varied. You have people who have very fine, straight hair, you have Asian people who have a natural wave to their hair, some thin, some thick, some fine. So I think it varies, just like it does in all humans. And the clients we have now are not just Japanese, we started to focus on a Japanese clientele, we tried to get the word out to the Japanese community but very shortly after that and certainly within a year, then Koreans came, then Chinese.

SL: They all found us.

EP: Yeah, word of mouth...it started to spread and now we do people from all the Pacific Rim countries, as well as Middle East and I think that the hair does vary within those subgroups.

IK: At the same time I think a lot of white people come here too.

AY: People always say I have thick hair. So I guess we have coarse, thick hair, so we have to somehow reduce it to make it very natural wave or natural body. If you just have straight fine hair and cut it straight it looks fine, you can do that. But if you have coarse hair and cut it straight, it looks awful. It doesn't have any movement. When it blows it's nice, you know.

CT: So is that why the razor technique is popular?

AY: Yes (hesitantly), but without razor we can use scissors to make it that way. The razor sometimes makes it very dry looking which a lot of my clients don't like that.

CT: My friend who I used to work with, was Chinese and she had her hair razored and it kind of looked like grass but she liked that and she would dye it funky colors. But I remember her saying that she had a hard time finding someone who would do that to her hair and they really didn't know how to handle her texture. So I think it's great that you offer people with different textures more options. You don't really have any competition right?

IK: No.

CT: So that probably really helped your business model?

EP: Yeah I think so. I think certainly in Virginia there are salons that are Vietnamese owned there's an area that has a lot of Vietnamese shops and everything but within the District, we don't [have any competition]. I wanted to go back and just touch on...I would say about 75% of our clients are Asian, 25% are Caucasian.

CT: Do you have any African American clients?

EP: A few, I guess.

SL: It's a styling issue, more than a cutting. A chemical and styling....

CT: Why do you say that?

SL: Well, as you know, it's a whole other planet because of the chemicals and the styling, it's not so much the cutting, it's everything else. It's time consumption in a totally different way, for the client and for the hairdresser. It's almost like a separate type of...so if somebody came to me, a black person, I would say, I can cut your hair, but I'm not very good at styling it...and some people have really, to use a bad phrase, good hair, and I can style that. It's from that Chris Rock film, which was pretty funny.

CT: Did anyone else see that? The documentary, *Good Hair*? It was interesting how many different kinds of people saw that.

SL: That was great. How did the black community and hairdressers take that?

CT: Varied, across the board. A lot of black women felt that *oh we don't want him to tell our secrets*. And there was this illusion presented that all black women are getting extensions and they're spending thousands of dollars on their hair, which isn't really true. My hairdresser said, "People aren't going to think your hair is real now."

SL: Yeah, "No black woman's hair gets that long."

CT: Right. But I understand his intention and why he brought it up. It's a very real issue.

SL: It's cool that he's asking his children...

CT: Right and that they were not feeling good about themselves and they asked, "Daddy, why don't I have good hair?" Because their hair has a kinky texture, so in the community it seems like people are trying to get rid of that but I'm interviewing so many different black hairstylists who are saying that women of color are now embracing their texture and they're trying to work with it, instead of work against it.

EP: Exactly, I think it's the working against it, that we're not good at. The cutting or course and then the straightening before the styling, or the curling before the styling.

CT: Do you do Japanese straightening here?

EP: We do.

CT: Okay, so how is it different from the Keratin Treatment or the Brazilian Blowout. Is there a chemical that actually straightens it? What is it?

AY: I never use a Keratin treatment or Brazilian Blowout because I'm not familiar with it but the Japanese hair straightening is a chemical that is used to straighten the hair.

CT: Do you know what chemical it is? Is it formaldehyde-based?

EP: No, the product we carry is not formaldehyde-based. That's been in the news lately so. It's the Liscio product which we get from a distributor in New York City who gets it from Japan. But it is a very time consuming thing. Akiko does the straightening for us and she always does it on Sundays. I like her to do it when she doesn't have other clients around and she likes to do it all herself.

CT: So is it Asians who have natural curly hair and want it straightened use this product?

IK: If their hair is fuzzy, they want it smooth.

CT: So you put the chemical on and then do you flat iron it into the hair? Is it a thermal treatment?

AY: Right.

CT: So a lot of black women were trying to use that but it wasn't so good for their hair, right?

EP: Well because if you are an African American woman and you have kind of curly hair and you want to wear it straight. If you have straightening done, it would straighten your hair but within a month, as soon as the new growth comes, it's going to grow out of your head, curly. So the Japanese straightening, you do twice a year, maybe. It is not like a relaxer, you can have a relaxer every 6-8 weeks. So if you are a person, not even necessarily African American who has very, very curly hair when it grows out of your scalp it will be very curly at the scalp. So that is one of the reasons why people who have *very* curly hair, as a lot of black women do, it's not a good product for them because can't do it every 8 weeks, you have to wait every 6 months to do it. That's one of the things we have to try to explain to people. I think there is a certain level of discomfort when African American people want to come to the salon. It kind of depends, like Steven said on how they want to wear their hair. If they like their hair natural and they want to wear a natural style, then we're fine with that, then we can do some great haircuts, but being in a city that's predominately black, it's kind of uncomfortable when people call. What I say when people call is, "We specialize in Asian hair. And so we don't do a lot of African American hair. You're welcome to come..."

SL: And that's always appreciated.

CT: Yes, I imagine so. I have been at the wrong place and they messed up my hair and I had to cut it all off because they didn't know what they were doing. I wish they had just told me they don't know....

EP: That's right. I think people are very nervous and we don't want to appear certainly racist, because we're not.

CT: No you're not.

EP: You know one of the things we've always thought about is that we celebrate diversity, we don't ignore it. We don't want to say we can do something that we can't. When we became Ozuki Salon, one of the biggest difficulties for us was getting past the [notion that] we want *everybody* to love us. We want to be the salon for *everyone*, because that's what people want, to be liked by everyone. But it's better to find your niche and find out what you do well and do it.

CT: So can you tell me what you do to celebrate Japanese culture here? I know you do Kimono dressing which I was really excited by. What other things are special to this salon?

EP: Well we use Japanese products and we sell Japanese products. We use Japanese color and perms as well as L'Oreal and some American products as well. We serve green tea to our clients with a little Japanese cookie. We try to really be respectful of people's time. We pride ourselves on running on time. If we're not running on time we like to call people and say "sorry, someone came late and so..."

CT: Is that how it is in Japan?

EP: [she nods yes]

IK: We teach people how to shampoo, that's where it starts. It's much more specialized here, we wash more thoroughly. Afterwards we give a little massage on the back.

SL: The experience is more of a comfort thing that they're used to having. It's more of a service.

CT: If you don't wash thoroughly, is it easier to wash Asian hair and not get it as clean?

EP: It doesn't have anything to do with the person you're shampooing, it has more to do with the shampoo technique. What I like about that type of shampoo when I'm getting my hair shampooed is that I feel like every part of my head has been tended to. It's not willy nilly. First there's this part, and then there's this part, and then there's this part....So when you're a client and you're lying there and you're being shampooed and I'm not here I think *they didn't really do so much on this side of my head*. You notice that sort of thing. They spent a lot time up here but not so much back here etc...*are they going to come to this side, are they going to come to this side?* But with the shampooists here, there is definitely a technique and you feel the *whole* head has been shampooed and then with a scalp massage afterwards and then also a shoulder and neck massage. When I have traveled to Japan, I have found the customer service to be excellent there, for everyone to feel welcomed, it's a way of treating people. It is kind of like the customer's always right but it goes farther

than that. So just in the terms of greeting people and making eye contact, *right this way* and you know you help them into their smock. If you've ever been to salon when you were younger and you're like *oh, where do I go, where do I go? My timer went off, have they forgotten about me?* It's to make sure that everyone feels comfortable, in whatever process they are in, from paying to shampooing, from the very beginning to the very end.

SL: Paying is different. *Do I tip, do I not tip?* You know some countries do, some countries don't. So when somebody says, "How much should I leave?"

CT: In traditional Japanese salons, do they tip?

EP: There's no tipping in Japan at all.

CT: So is there tipping here [at Ozuki]?

EP: There is tipping here. Tipping as you know is a difficult concept, some people tip, some people don't. Some people know to tip, or know that they should, or know that they should *if* they liked the service. Some people don't know at all. I don't want to tell people, you should tip, because if they don't want to tip, then that makes me uncomfortable. But people want to know if they *should* tip. It's a very difficult situation that we try to gingerly wade into then wade back out. If you want information about it, I'm happy to give it to you but I'm not going to say that you should or shouldn't.

CT: So how many people do you get from Japan versus people who live here? It seems like for dignitaries and people who are coming here looking for a place that feels like home. Do they come here?

EP: Yes. People come to work in Washington DC for various companies or embassies or the IMF or the World Bank or students and they're here for a while and then they go home. I think lots of people work for Japanese companies in the United States, they're here for a couple of years and then they go back. And so those people here from...sometimes their predecessors or their co-workers or other students. And then there are just clients who just live in the United States and then occasionally we will get people who are visiting from Japan or from other Asian countries to go to a party or to go to a meeting or to go to a graduation or to a wedding...and those people tend to only come for special occasions.

[clients are starting to come into the salon]

CT: Just to wrap up can someone talk about how it's different working here?

AY: I used to work at this salon and this previous owner, she was American and Scottish. It was a chain. When I was working there I wanted to know about different hair, wavy hair, fine hair, because I had only worked with Asian hair so.

CT: It seems like people are coming to you specifically to get more contemporary styles, is that right?

AY: Yeah.

CT: Because I think it's rare to find a stylist like you. For instance if an Asian kid wants his hair to look like Steven Tyler's he's not going to go to a traditional Japanese stylist because even though they might be familiar with his hair texture they wouldn't know how to do that style and it seems like that's what you're bringing to this place, is that true?

AY: Yes, that's true. I have a lot of people come here and bring me pictures of Anime characters, because in Japan, it's a very animation-based country.

CT: That must be really hard because it's a drawing. That's not even real hair.

AY: Right, right!

SL: She can do it.

AY: Yeah, I'm Japanese so *she knows how to do it*. So when I was in LA, for example.

CT: Where were you in LA?

AY: I was in Pasadena.

CT: What was the name of the salon?

AY: Star House, they changed to Crown Studio. Their clientele was very commercial, very...not like here, very different. A lot of blondes.

[More clients are walking in so we decide to move the recording equipment to the back room]